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The Other Weavers: Navajo Basket Makers

To most people, Navajo weaving is synonymous with Navajo textiles. However, there is another weaving tradition that is less well-known. The relative obscurity of Navajo basket weaving is the result of historic socio-economic factors which in turn precipitated a decline in basketry production. As early as 1894, Washington Matthews wrote, "the art of basket making today is little cultivated among the Navajos."[1] In the late 1930's, Kluckhohn's informants reported that Utes and Paiutes were making most of the baskets used for Navajo ceremonies.[2] Tschopik in 1938 observed, "a few [Navajo baskets] continue to be manufactured... many more, apparently, are purchased from traders who in turn secure them from the Ute and Paiute."[3] In 1968, Gilpin noted that Navajo basket makers were rapidly declining in number.[4] Another recent contribution to this gloomy prognoisis comes from the October 1978 issue of the *Navajo Area Newsletter* which reported, "the fine art of Navajo basket making is a dying art."[5] In spite of the overwhelming evidence to the contrary, this paper will argue (with apologies to Mark Twain) that rumors of its death have been greatly exaggerated.

During summer field work in the early 1970s, I resided outside Shonto, Arizona, located in the northwestern portion of the Navajo Reservation. At that time, I found no reason to question the generalized myth that baskets were on the endangered species list of Navajo craft arts. Therefore, my curiosity was considerably aroused as reports began to reach me concerning a proliferation of baskets being sold at trading posts in the region. I could not help recall that this area is geographically adjacent to Southern Paiute-Ute country and was traditionally a region in which intermarriage between the Navajo and their northern neighbors was common. I therefore made immediate plans to return to the Reservation to see if in fact the alleged renaissance was a reality, and if there was any correlation between that reality and the geographic-kinship relationship between the Navajo and their neighbors.

Early Spanish chronicles indicate that the Navajo were trading their baskets (and other items) to the Pueblo Indians by the early 1600's.[6] There were three major types of baskets commonly woven by the Navajo before the turn of this century: the pitch-covered bottle-shaped container used to transport and store water; the burden basket used to collect edible wild foods and to carry corn; and the basketry tray used to hold food and to serve various ritual functions. By the early twentieth century, both the pitched bottle and the carrying basket had become obsolete as a result of the increasing availability of manufactured utilitarian containers that served the same purposes. Another factor which may have contributed to the decline was the gradual disappearance of the basic raw material, the yucca plant, as a result of overgrazing.[7] The basketry tray is the only type still woven, and is therefore the subject of this paper.

Although these baskets are often referred to as "wedding baskets" because of their use in marriage ceremonies, their ritual function is in fact much broader. Ceremonial use of these dish-shaped baskets derives from the Emergence Myth, and their continued use and manufacture can be partially attributed to their ritual-specific context. Basket dishes serve as containers for religious paraphernalia, sacred corn meal, medicinal herbs and yucca suds; as ceremonial drums and resonance chambers; and as portions of certain masks. They also constitute part of the payment given to the religious specialist who conducts the ceremony.

Because of these ceremonial requirements, basket dishes are usually tightly woven and water resistant. The technique used in weaving these baskets has persisted throughout the history of the craft. Both foundation and coil are made from split sumac twigs. The size of the coil is determined by the number of splits and/or size of the bundle used in the foundation. Sumac is becoming increasingly scarce on the Reservation, so most of the material used today is collected in Colorado or Utah. According to some informants, the best time for gathering sumac is during the autumn months when the sap is down. Others prefer the whiter sumac available between May and August. After gathering, the sumac is then dried and split in preparation for weaving. The splits are soaked in water immediately prior to weaving to make them smooth and pliable. Traditionally, the sumac was dyed in the same materials used to dye wool: black was made from the Rocky Mountain bee weed or from surface coal; various shades of red and brown were made from juniper and mountain mahogany roots mixed with alder bark. Today, most weavers rely on easier and quicker aniline dyes.

Older baskets from museum collections affirm Tanner's observation that Navajos once wove a variety of designs.[8] Although some contemporary weavers are elaborating on this tradition, most baskets continue to be made in the distinctive "wedding basket" design. The so-called "spirit line" or "weaver's pathway" is a symbolic exit for both the spirit of the basket and the energies of the weaver.[9] Because the end of the rim stitch is in alignment with the "spirit line," it serves as a directional orientation for the Medicine Man to face the pathway towards the ritually appropriate East. The distinctive herringbone rim stitch has mythological origins. According to Mathews:

> In the ancient days, a navajo woman was seated under a juniper tree finishing a basket in the style of other tribes, as was then the Navajo custom, and while so engaged she was intently thinking if some stronger and more beautiful margin could not be devised. As she thus sat in thought, the god Qastceyelci [Talking God] tore from the overhanging juniper tree a small spray and cast it into her basket. It immediately occurred to initiate in her work the peculiar fold of the uniper leaves and she soon devised a way of doing so.[10]

The ceremonial context of basketry trays applied not only to their use, but also to their manufacture. The basket maker was obliged to conform to an elaborate complex of ritual requirements during the weaving process. For example, while making a basket, the weaver had to remain isolated from her family. A brief blessing rite was always performed before she could return to the hogan. With the exception of a few transvestites, men were prohibited from weaving process. It was believed that a man who violated this restriction would become impotent. Indeed, Tschopik argued that the decrease in the supply of ceremonial baskets was a direct result of the multiplicity of taboos associated with the weaving.[11] However, since many other aspects of Navajo life were permeated with ritual proscriptions and remained viable, Tschopik's argument does not provide sufficient explanation of the decline in the number of basket weavers. The decline and revival of Navajo basket weaving has not been an isolated phenomenon, but has been related to the whole of Navajo culture and the changes that have occurred, and continue to occur, from within and without. Therefore it seems reasonable to look at other parts of the cultural system for a more comprehensive understanding of basket making developments during the twentieth century.

Weaving baskets was exclusively a woman's craft art: so was weaving blankets and rugs. Although Navajo textiles were originally woven for Navajo use,

by the middle of the nineteenth century, they had become important items of trade with the Utes and Plains tribes. The establishment of Anglo-managed trading posts on the Reservation in the late nineteenth century provided a new marketplace for the sale of Navajo rugs designed to appeal to Anglo buyers. Phillips, and others, stress the importance of the high market value of Navajo rugs relative to the low value of baskets. "Blankets and baskets were made only by women and during the same season of the year. Since the trade value of blankets exceeded that of baskets, production of the former increased, while that of the latter decreased."[12]

Although economic factors clearly had a signficiant influence on the decline of basketry production, Navajos continued to need baskets for use in their ceremonials. This problem was apparently solved by the availability of southern Paiute and Ute baskets which serve the same purpose. These tribes were geographic neighbors of the Navajo and participated in the Navajo trade network. Several authorities speculate that the Ute and Paiute borrowed basketry techniques and designs from the Navajo during the early nineteenth century.[13] While the actual borrowing process cannot be documented, the baskets of these northern neighbors sufficiently resemble their Navajo counterparts as to be virtually indistinguishable on cursory examination. It seems probable that there must have been some inital hesitation regarding the use of baskets that were not made by Navajos, and thus lacked the appropriate ritual sanctions. However, in this case necessity became the mother of accommodation.

The establishment of Navajo versus Paiute provenience has been of interest to Kluckhohn and Hill, and Tschopik, among others. Based on pre-twentieth century basketry construction, two salient diagnostic traits have been proposed: (1) a two-rod and bundle foundation for Navajo versus a three-rod foundation for Paiute; (2) a "sunwise" coil direction for Navajo versus counterclockwise for Paiute. There has been general agreement in the literature regarding the rod and bundle hypothesis; however, recent research by the author (with Parrish and Whiteford) in various museum collections has raised serious doubts regarding the validity of this analysis. We are discovering that many older baskets, catalogued as Paiute (presumably on the basis of three-rod construction) have other traits (e.g., shape, design, quality of weaving) that suggest Navajo origins. One problem that seems ubiquitous is the assumption that *all* twentieth century "Navajo" baskets were woven by the Paiute (or Ute) — an assumption that is reflected

in the available catalogue information. If our hunch is correct, it is possible that the early twentieth century decline of Navajo basket weaving was not as dramatic as the literature suggests. Hopefully, continued research may produce a more definitive understanding; however at the moment, the further we delve, the more confused we become. Opinions regarding the direction of the coil are equally problematical.[14] (My informants support the Franciscan Fathers (1910) description of a "sunwise" coil, while Stewart (1938) and Tschopik (1940) argue the opposite.) However, the historical reality concerning both diagnostic traits emerges, there is consensus regarding current technology. Both Navajo and Paiute weavers utilize three-rod foundations and sew the coil counterclockwise. Information provided by my Navajo informants indicates that these techniques are utilized today because they are "easier" and "quicker" than "old" methods.

In any case, it is certainly more than coincidence that the nuclear area for the recent Navajo basketry revival (bordered by Navajo Mountain on the west, Oljato on the east, the San Juan River on the north and highway 160 on the south) is the region of the Reservation that is adjacent to southern Paiute and Ute country. In addition to geographic proximity, many women of these northern neighboring tribes have married Navajo men. Southern Paiute and Ute women may have kept the basket weaving tradition during the alleged period of decline among the Navajo. Thus as the economic climate of the Indian art market began to flourish, Navajos were able to re-learn the craft. Virginia Smith of Oljato Trading Post observes that some of the current Navajo weavers on the Oljato area are originally from Navajo Mountain, an area that has long witnessed intermarriage between southern Paiute and Navajo. Smith further states that most of the other Navajo weavers from Oljato are first or second generation descendants of Navajo Mountain families. Thus, the kinship network in this northwestern part of Navajoland has functioned as a natural agent for transmitting basketry technology.

In addition to the geographic and kinship connections, some of the same factors which have been attributed to the decline of the Navajo basket weaving may have been at work in reverse to stimulate the revitalization. Parezo discusses how taboos surrounding Navajo sandpainting gradually relaxed in response to the stimulus of the Indian art market.[15] This process of relaxation also applies to basket weaving. There would appear to be a direct correlation between the current economic incentive associated with all forms of Indian art and the increased secularization of both sandpainting

and basket weaving. Basket weavers no longer work in isolation and the blessing rite has been largely abandoned. Most contemporary weavers produce baskets on a part-time basis; however, there are a few women who weave baskets throughout the year, thus ignoring the traditional prohibition on winter weaving . These full-time weavers make collecting trips to Colorado and/or Utah at least once a month, even though sumac gathered in spring and summer is weaker and more difficult to work than material gathered in the fall. The introduction of basket weaving classes at Navajo Community College in the late 1960's provided further impetus towards secularization. Finally, the existance of a few male basket weavers is a strong argument for the demise of ancient taboos.

The secularized, commercially-oriented aspect of the basketry revival can also be seen in innovative experiments with new shapes, sizes, designs and functions. For example, Virginia Smith's basketry collection includes a large coiled basketry clock. An impractically large (five feet in diameter), but beautifully woven basket was made in 1979 by Mary Holidy Black. An impractically small (two inches in diameter), but beautifully woven basket was made the same year by Mary's sister-in-law, Sandra Black. Sally Black, Mary's daughter, has not only been experimenting with non-traditional sizes in her baskets, but also frequently incorporates designs borrowed from other groups (e.g., Pima/Papago and Western Apache), often incorporating both in the same basket. While her departure from convention has generated criticism from some older Navajos (including Medicine Men), Sally's basketweaving reflects the development of a new phenomenon: the conflict between individual creative expression and the dictates of traditional boundaries.

In addition to these women, Olive and Lillian Holiday, Zonnie Boseley, Martha Katso and David Black are among the best of the avant garde Navajo weavers. All are from the Oljato area. Their finely woven baskets with thunderbird, kachina and yei designs are in great demand by Anglo collectors, even though these designs constitute further radical departures from traditional patterns. The production of these baskets is encouraged by the management of Oljato Trading Post. The Smiths have a long waiting list of persons interested in specific baskets made by specific weavers.

In 1961, Shepardson and Hammond's Navajo Mountain informants reported, "Ladies around here are giving up basket making. . . it's too hard to do, it takes too much time. . . basket making is really dying out."[16] Madelene Cameron of Navajo Mountain Trading Post

confirms that this downward trend continued into the 1970s. For example, in 1971 Cameron's records indicate that there were only five Navajo basket weavers in the region. However, by 1978, that number had increased to twenty-five. Oljato reports 70 weavers in that same year. The combined total inventory for Oljato, Kayenta and Navajo Mountain Trading Posts in 1978 was 900 baskets, representing a total of 105 weavers. Of this total inventory, 690 baskets were woven by Navajo women and 55 by Navajo men. An additional 132 baskets were woven by southern Paiute women and 26 more by Navajo/Paiutes. Traders' mark-ups on these baskets ranged from five percent for baskets under $50 to 50 percent for larger pieces. The price range of baskets sold was from $2.00 to $200. There were 750 baskets sold to other posts and dealers, while 150 were sold to individual Navajos. Navajos will often re-sell the baskets they buy to other Navajos in the southern part of the Reservation to use for ceremonial purposes. Since other posts and dealers also retail to Navajos, it is reasonable to assume that the total number of Navajo buyers substantially exceeded 150. Although Navajo Mountain Trading Post only buys new baskets from individual weavers, both Oljato and Kayenta frequently buy used baskets from Medicine Men. This market is particularly active in the late spring after the winter ceremonial cycle. Kayenta Trading Post obtains most of its inventory from weavers who have not been able to sell their baskets to Oljato or Navajo Mountain due to oversaturated inventories at these posts.

According to Cameron, a typical basket weaver makes one to two baskets a week during the winter months. An average basket will be bought by the trader for between $40 and $50. Thus, basket weaving provides an additional source of revenue for families who ordinarily must rely on sheep herding, part-time wage work, and/or welfare payments for their income. In fact, the basket weaving business has become so popular that new weavers appear every year. Some of these women have never previously been involved in any kind of craft production; others have given up rug weaving or beadwork to devote their time and creative energies to basket weaving. Baskets still do not command the kind of renumerations that rugs do; however, since they are less complicated and time-consuming to produce, a weaver can make several baskets in the time it would take to weave one rug. In 1974, the Federal Trade Commission's "Truth in Lending" regulations, which prohibited barter as a means of exchange at the trading posts, stimulated further reliance on a cash economy, thus contributing to the commercial incentive

for weaving baskets. The role of the trading post as a marketing vehicle has therefore become increasingly important in the commercial distribution through its retail stores.

Two other developments are worth mentioning. While basket weaving classes continue to be held at Navajo Community College, they have also become increasingly popular at Reservation high schools. A basket made by a Monument Valley High School student won First Grand Prize at the 1978 Navajo Tribal Fair. There also has been a minor revival in the production of the pitch-covered water container. However, these bottles are decorative, non-utilitarian items made specifically for the tourist market.

The economic impact of the Indian art has clearly had a profound influence on the commercialization of Navajo basket making. Although the transition of Navajo-made for Navajo-use to Navajo-made for the non-Navajo market has resulted in periods of decline, it has recently become a catalyst for creative revival. The particular case of the basketry renaissance reflects the continuities and changes that characterize other aspects of twentieth century Navajo life. Certainly, the revival has been a response to external market developments; however, the number of baskets made by Navajos and purchased by Navajos for ceremonial use suggests that the traditional ritual function of the basketry dish remains an intrinsic part of Navajo life.